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Dramatising Solidarity and Unification in Divided Palestine: The Chorus and the Ghost in Kamel EL-Basha's *Following the Footsteps of Hamlet* (2013)

Ziad Abushalha

Department of Comparative Literature, University of Szeged, Dugonics Square 13, H-6720 Szeged, Hungary; h141945@stud.u-szeged.hu

Abstract: This essay explores how Kamel EL-Basha's theatre production *Following the Footsteps of Hamlet* (2013) preaches unity and resistance in a post-2006 divided Palestine. After giving a brief historical account of the causes of the internal Palestinian political divisions that distract Palestinians from achieving liberation, the article traces how EL-Basha uses theatrical devices such as the chorus and the ghost to materialise a sense of unification in the theatrical space. The analysis draws on other international theatrical practices like Einar Schleef's (1980) 'Choric Theatre' and cites critical works such as Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) to locate EL-Basha's theatrical practice in a broader context regarding the significance of the chorus in dramatising unity. The essay also traces how the performance of traditional Palestinian songs, ululation, dances like dabke and other rituals in the play, help foster Palestinian identity and shape their sumud (steadfastness) in facing the occupation. Finally, the essay focuses on the role of the ghost in evoking nostalgia in the audience for the days of unity and collective resistance promoted by the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat before his death.

Keywords: Palestinian theatre; resistance; adaptation; unity; *Hamlet*



Citation: Abushalha, Ziad. 2022. Dramatising Solidarity and Unification in Divided Palestine: The Chorus and the Ghost in Kamel EL-Basha's *Following the Footsteps of Hamlet* (2013). *Humanities* 11: 3. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h11010003>

Received: 12 November 2021

Accepted: 15 December 2021

Published: 22 December 2021

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1. Introduction

Palestinians have shown firm resistance to the Israeli occupation since 1948 and have been unified in their legitimate struggle for liberation. However, after 2006 Palestinians have suffered from divisive internal geopolitical rifts involving the two leading political parties—Fatah and Hamas. This has exacerbated tensions for Palestinians already living under occupation and suffering the impacts of the Israeli Separation Wall that has divided Palestine since 2002. The division within the internal Palestinian politics can be traced back to the general election following the death of Yasser Arafat, the previous Chairman of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), and President of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) from 1994 to 2004. In 2006, Palestinians in West Bank and Gaza Strip headed to the polling stations to vote for the Palestinian Legislation Assembly and to choose a successor president for Arafat. The elections resulted in victory for Hamas representatives who won the election with 44% of the votes, ending an era of Fatah dominance (Zanotti 2010, p. 44).

Hamas's victory led to armed clashes between the two factions after a failed attempt to create a unity government. Since 2007, the Palestinian leadership has been divided, with Hamas governing the Gaza Strip and the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority governing the West Bank. This political rift has persisted for the next fifteen years, causing more problems for Palestinians seeking liberation from the Israeli occupation. The two parties have continuous "costly and stifling disputes, while the Palestinians and Palestine continue to bleed under the Israeli occupation" (Matar and Harb 2013, p. 127).¹

A nostalgia has been felt among Palestinians yearning for the days of Arafat's leadership, who maintained less divisive policies than the current President Mahmoud Abbas. The yearning for a unified resistant Palestine that can continue its liberation project has

been reflected in national poetry, traditional dance, songs, and dramas. Dramatic works like Eyad Abu Shareea's *Al-Habl Al-Sori* (*The Umbilical Cord*) in 2010, Ali Abu Yassin's *Al-Qafas* (*The Cage*) in 2015, and Ashraf Al-Afifi's *Sabe'a Ard* (*Seven Grounds Under*) in 2017 appeared after 2007 to preach unity and sumud (steadfastness) against occupation (See [Abusultan 2021](#)). The Palestinian theatre always plays "an active part in the border project of Palestinian national liberation by contesting Zionist discourse" ([Varghese 2020](#), p. 2) and often "remains politically contextualized within a framework of resistance, resilience, and self-development" ([Jawad 2013](#), p. 156). It portrays "the hardships of occupation, to remind us of the lost homeland, and to champion a political solution and the creation of an independent state" ([Nassar 2006](#), p. 16). Keeping that in mind, the Palestinian dramas produced after 2006 in the West Bank and Gaza Strip also focused on the political split between Fatah and Hamas as on addressing the Israeli occupation. Dramas like *Al-Habl Al-Sori*, premiered at Rashad Shawwa Cultural Center on 7 March 2010, was "an escape valve for what people say in secret, their frustration about the division and their anger over the foreign aid that interferes with [political] decisions" (Cited in [Abusultan 2021](#), pp. 39–40). *Seven Grounds Under* is another biting comedy produced by the Culture and Free Thought Association in Gaza Strip in 2017, which reflects the concerns of youth in the Gaza Strip living under the Israeli and Egyptian blockades, and criticises the empty promises of Palestinian leaders ([Abusultan 2021](#), p. 47). These dramas and many others preached solidarity in post-Arafat Palestine and called for an end to the internal conflict that distracted Palestinians from their main struggle.

Kamel El-Basha's *Following the Footsteps of Hamlet* represents the same concerns for unification through an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. What distinguishes El-Basha's performance is the employment of the chorus playing Hamlet and Ophelia instead of the traditional individual characters. The chorus dress similarly, walk and talk collectively to dramatise and materialise solidarity among Palestinians. Another distinctive theatrical device is the ghost that uniquely maintains a permanent presence on the stage. The presence of the ghost with its huge size, (see the description below), targets the memory of the audience and compels them to remember the days of Arafat.²

The Arabic-language production premiered at the Al-Hakawati National Theatre in Jerusalem, and last for one hour and a half. It is based on Jabra's Arabic translation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and maintains the same plot as the original play with few theatrical modifications. The staging is minimal, with few sets or props used on the stage. A black curtain is used as a backdrop to the playing area, and black was also evident in the characters' dress which consisted of long black robes with red scarfs, or *kufiya*, draped around the actors' shoulders.

2. The Chorus and Unification

One of the theatrical devices used by EL-Basha in his performance is the employment of two choruses who played the roles of Hamlet and Ophelia instead of individual actors. Hamlet's chorus consists of eight actors who in most of the time speak Hamlet's dialogue and monologue collectively (See Figure 1). Six actors shape the other chorus playing Ophelia; while, individual actors play the main characters of the King and Queen (See Figure 2). Polonius and Laertes are acted by individuals from Hamlet's chorus.

The two choruses sometimes merge and shape a band of fourteen actors dressed in black, sing, dance, move, and speak identically. The performance starts with the two choruses entering the stage as one band walking in a military march accompanied by martial music. They walk the width of the stage back and forth in synchronous steps for a few minutes ([El-Basha 2013](#), 1:00–3:00). After that, the band splits into groups of threes and twos. They sing in a collective voice a well-known religious song, called "Yarasoul Allah" (Oh prophet of God). The song is followed by the recitation of verses from the Holy Quran by an individual actor to arrange for King Hamlet's funeral. The chorus then shifts to celebrate the marriage of Claudius and Gertrude through performing random dabke movements acted respectively by individual male actors.³ The dance is accompanied by

Zagareed, an ululation usually performed by Palestinian women, which is a high pitched vocal sound made with the quick movement of the tongue up and down in the mouth (Sturman 2019, p. 120).



Figure 1. The chorus of Hamlet in El-Basha’s production comprising a group of eight actors who collectively speak most of Hamlet’s lines. Photo: Akram Safadi. Courtesy of Kamel El-Basha and the Al-Hakawati Palestinian National Theatre.



Figure 2. The chorus of Ophelia in El-Basha’s production. Photo: Akram Safadi. Courtesy of Kamel El-Basha and the Al-Hakawati Palestinian National Theatre.

Claudius then addresses Hamlet’s chorus directly asking them, “How is it that the clouds still hang on you?” and the chorus replies collectively: “Not so, my lord. I am too

much i' the sun" (El-Basha 2013, 11:12).⁴ Gertrude also demands that Hamlet stop wearing the black clothes and behave in a friendly manner, "Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off, And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark," and the chorus sarcastically answers, "I shall in all my best obey you, madam" (El-Basha 2013, 11:17). Claudius and Gertrude then leave, and the two choruses of Hamlet and Ophelia start roaming the stage impatiently as one group. They sit and begin beating the ground with their hands. They make a circle after that and repeat Hamlet's famous monologue "this too, too sullied flesh would melt," as they are mourning the death of King Hamlet and lament the hasty marriage of the Queen (See Figure 3).

<p>The Chorus:</p> <p>Oh, that this too, too sullied flesh would melt, Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew, Or that the Everlasting had not fixed His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God, God! How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable Seem to me all the uses of this world! Fie on 't, ah fie! 'Tis an unweeded garden That grows to seed. Things rank and gross in nature Possess it merely. That it should come to this.</p> <p>MEMBER 1:</p> <p>But two months dead—nay, not so much, not two. So excellent a king.</p> <p>MEMBER 2:</p> <p>So loving to my mother That he might not between the winds of heaven Visit her face too roughly. — Heaven and earth, Must I remember? Why, she would hang on him As if increase of appetite had grown By what it fed on, and yet, within a month— Let me not think on't.</p>	<p>الجرقة:</p> <p>اه ليت هذا الجسد المكاد ينوب وينحل فطرات من الندى، يا ليت الازل لم يصبغ خريجه جند قبل الذات. رباه، رباه ها احدا ما تبكر لي عادات الدنيا هذه معتييه، عتيقه، فاهيه، لا نفع منها. إلا تبأ لها تبأ لها آتيا العذبة لم تعشب، شاحت وبزرت، لا يفلوها إلا كل معشوق نلت راحته أخذ الحناء الجرقة (يشكل مفرد): أهكلا تنتهي الأكلور—لم يخلص على مؤبه خيران بل اقل من خيران: اقل من خيران، معتي آخر من الجرقة: كان يخلق إني فلا يطلع لريح السماء يرتزة وجوها إذا إنكنت. يا شعاع، امحورم علي ان اتنكر؟ وإله! كانت تتلقى به. كأما أزدباد الشهية قد إنك بعدا تعذت عليه — ويع ذلك، فلهذا خيرا!</p>
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Figure 3. Shakespeare's text and the Arabic translation of the speech 'O That This Too Solid Flesh Would Melt', which is spoken by the Hamlet Chorus in Act I Scene 2. The text is transcribed from a video of the production posted on YouTube (See El-Basha 2013).

Hamlet's chorus meets the ghost in the next scene, which informs them about the murder. The chorus then performs a short Mousetrap to verify Claudius's murder. Hamlet's chorus then enters the stage trying to take revenge by killing Claudius, but they find Claudius praying. They storm into Gertrude's chamber immediately to confront her. They surround her, trying to remind her how she has offended his dead father by marrying Claudius. Polonius, who hides behind the arras, shouts and calls out for help leading the chorus to stab him to death.

Laertes, acted by one of Hamlet's chorus, appears and discovers his father's death, and Claudius convinces Laertes of taking revenge. Meanwhile, Ophelia's chorus appears singing a sad song as if she has suffered madness due to her father's death. The six female actors acted a collective death on the stage, and Gertrude laments Ophelia's death by singing a sad traditional song, sang usually for Palestinian martyrs who died in their fighting for the occupation.⁵ After that, Hamlet's chorus splits into two groups: four members represent Laertes fighting the other four which represent Hamlet, and Kufiyas are used in the combat instead of swords.⁶ Gertrude drinks the poisoned goblet of wine toasting Hamlet and she eventually dies. The stage becomes covered with fifteen bodies:

several Hamlets, Laertes, Ophelias and a Gertrude. The performance ends with the bodies rising from death to follow the ghost which leads them slowly outside the stage. They collectively sing another familiar Arabic Muwashshah song on their way out, leaving Claudius alone and alive on the stage.⁷

EL-Basha's employment of the chorus is perplexing for the spectators at the beginning, especially those who are not familiar with the aspects of choric theatre. The confusion appears early when it becomes difficult for them to identify individual actors for Hamlet and Ophelia and to understand why Ophelia's chorus accompanies Hamlet in his speech sometimes. Jamal Al-Qwasmy accentuates this perplexity in his review for the play saying, "The young men were all representing Hamlet, and the young women representing Ophelia, but I did not understand why some young women would cast Hamlet especially when he confronts his mother and accuses her of adultery and tells her not to go to his uncle's bed" (Al-Qwasmy 2010). Another difficulty is caused by the excessive and quick movements of the chorus on the stage, which potentially distracts spectators from focusing on the speeches. Despite that, the spectators are quickly engaged in the show and the majority respond positively to the character's dance and singing (See El-Basha 2013, 4:32 & 13:42). The chorus's collective movements also help tune the spectator's bodies as the latter follow the movements with their eyes from one point to the other on the stage. One can sense a mutual energy circulating in the space between the actors and the spectators alike: the actors act, and the spectators immediately react. This harmony felt in the space would not have happened without the employment of the chorus.

The appearance of the chorus on the stage always signifies the nation's desire for fusion, especially when political rifts dominate the scene and hinder resistance exactly like the political atmosphere in post-2006 Palestine. Edith Hall comments on the role of the chorus, arguing that they "represent the we. Their oneness was expressed theatrically: visually, through matching costumes and masks, and also with collective dance movements; and audibly, through the choral singing of odes" (Cited in Evans 2019, p. 140). Hans-Thies Lehmann also asserts that "the chorus offers the possibility of manifesting a collective body that assumes a relationship to social phantasms and desires of fusion" (Lehmann 2009, p. 130). On the applicable side, the significance of the Choric Theatre in preaching unity is manifested in the German Einar Schleef's *The Mothers* (1986). He created a catwalk stage on which three female choruses walk, run, deliver their speech, interlude, and surround the spectators from a different direction (See Fischer-Lichte 2017, pp. 315–27). Schleef's theatre is inspired by his dream of a unified Germany, and the chorus reflects how the theatre "strove for total incorporation of all its members and threatened those who insisted on their individuality with marginalization and alienation" (Fischer-Lichte 2017, p. 317). Still, the first critic to pay attention to the importance of the chorus as a theatrical unification device was probably Nietzsche in his seminal book *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). Nietzsche imagined the role of the chorus away from its traditional role as ideal spectators who create aesthetic distance and prevent the spectator's identification with the characters. Instead, the dithyrambic Chorus Satyrs, as Nietzsche believed, is essential in the Greek dramas, and it celebrates the God Dionysius and reminded the Athenians of their sociality in comparison to Apollo, the god of rationalism and individuality. Nietzsche says:

In truth, however, this hero is the suffering Dionysus of the mysteries, that god experiencing in himself the agonies of individuation, the god of whom marvellous myths speak, telling the story of how he as a boy was dismembered by the Titans and is now worshipped in that state as Zagreus: which suggests that this dismemberment, the properly Dionysian suffering, is similar to a transformation into earth, wind, fire, and water, and that we should regard the state of individuation as the source and original cause of suffering, as something objectionable in itself. (Nietzsche 2000, pp. 59–60)

In the same way that social bonds are established between the spectators that Nietzsche identifies, the chorus in EL-Basha's performance dress similarly and talk in a collective voice for most of the time. This works to help materialise a unity among Palestinian

audiences coming from different cities inside and outside the Israeli Wall, holding different ideologies (Muslims, Christians, Jews, conservatives, or liberals), and having different political affiliations (Hamas, Fateh, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Palestinian National Initiative, or other independent political association). This unity is seen also in engaging the audience in the show by addressing him/her directly sometimes, and by asking the individual spectator to engage in the singing. However, video recording of the performance shows that a few individuals liked to remain disengaged in the show, but this engagement/disengagement dichotomy does not prevent the show from achieving its unifying goal. El-Basha is aware of this dichotomy and allows individual performances from time to time in his show. This is seen when individual members of the chorus speak some lines individually and when they perform the dance movements individually too. Still, the general outcome is that a harmonious community is felt in the space and the barriers between the individuals are broken. This temporal community, sensed in the one-hour-and-half show and created by the harmonious movements of the chorus, is what matters most. The performance becomes like a social game and a festival played and celebrated by all for all.

The chorus does not only run and speak collectively to achieve this unity, but it also performs some traditional songs and dances significant to solidify that feeling. The American hip hop dance performed regularly by individual actors on the stage and witnessed by the other members of the chorus and the spectators alike manifest resistance and compel audiences to reflect on the danger that political conflict causes. The traditional songs and the hip hop dances are also mixed with dabke—a traditional folk-dance that has always been part of the Palestinian struggle for liberation. David A. McDonald describes the connection between Palestinian identity and performing dabke in historical Palestine and the diaspora, suggesting that to preserve the dabke is to preserve the nation:

In the face of Israeli encroachment and the erasure of Palestinian space, time, and presence, the preservation of indigenous practices such as the dabke forcefully resists dispossession. Folklore is resistance. Detached from its ‘precious soil’, Palestinian identity, history, and nation must be kept alive, carried, preserved, and performed fact. (McDonald 2013, p. 22)

Other traditional rituals acted on the stage are the funeral ritual performed at the beginning for king Hamlet, accompanied by Quranic verses that the individual player recites while the chorus and the spectators are listening. After the funeral, the female chorus of Ophelia performed some ceremonial practices like ululation to celebrate happy occasions like the wedding of Claudius and Gertrude in the play. What is typical between these sad or happy rituals is that they are similarly performed in different Palestinian cities inside and outside the Wall and they help in strengthening social affinity among Palestinians. It is not only in Palestine that performing rituals and ceremonies seek unity, but all the colonised and marginalised nations have their performative rituals as part of their struggle to achieve liberation. Barbara Ehrenreich asserts how Westerners used to perceive such performative rituals by the colonised nations in Africa as “ecstatic ritual, noisy, crude, impious, and, simply, dissolute” (Ehrenreich 2007, p. 3). This does not deny the fact that some Europeans have known and practiced some performative rituals, but the general inclination, especially with nineteenth-century European idealism, was to celebrate individuation more than community. After the 1930s, Western anthropologists began to see these “bizarre seeming activities of native people as mechanisms for achieving cohesiveness, generating a sense of unity and became a way of renewing the bonds that held a community together” (Ehrenreich 2007, p. 10). In his book *Theatre, Society and Nation: Staging American Identities* (2008), S.E. Wilmer also gives an example of the Indigenous Lakota Tribe performing ‘Ghost Dances’ to accentuate their identity against the white cultural hegemony and the genocide and confiscation of their lands by the white Americans. For almost two weeks, they perform dances by which they aspire to connect themselves with the ghosts of their predecessors, revive their values, reconfigure their nation, resist assimilations and assert separate Indian identity (Wilmer 2008, p. 8). All that appears

in El-Basha's theatre is utilised to show Palestinian identity and preaches solidarity. The chorus, the dance, and the wearing of the kufiya, all reflect this. For Palestinians, the kufiya is "an allegory for national unity" and "a badge of national identity and activism" (O'Brien and Rosberry 1991, pp. 170–71). The sound of happy ululation produced by women reflects their joy significant to heal the wounds and reflect their unbroken determination in facing the occupation. Indeed, the ululations have a political connection as embedded in popular culture: "The manifestations of joy, songs, and ululations were always associated with the culture of the Palestinian Revolution" (A Purse, A Song 2021).

3. The Ghost and Memory

Another theatrical device used by El-Basha for preaching unity and sumud in divided Palestine is the ghost. The ghost is permanently present on the stage, dominating the playing area with its nine feet tall size. Often the character occupies much of the space and sometimes blocks the way of other characters, forcing them to go around it. It is dressed in a dark robe that covers its body from the head to foot, and the face is covered with a white mask presenting an anguished face and reminiscent of the kind of masks used in Japanese Noh theatre (See Figure 4). Inside the moving statue, the actor AbdulSalam Abduh performed and voiced the lines (Following the Footsteps of Hamlet 2009). What additionally can be noticed is its constant movement that can be described as slow and monotonous. It keeps watching and observing the characters and listening to their speech all the time. Still, Hamlet's chorus can see the ghost twice in the play: in Act I, where the chorus suddenly comes across the spirit that reveals to them the secret of Claudius's murder, and in Gertrude's room, where the ghost orders them not to harm her. The spectators, in contrast, can see the ghost all the time on the stage with its huge size and continuous movement.



Figure 4. The moving statue of the ghost in El-Basha's production. Photo: Akram Safadi. Courtesy of Kamel El-Basha and the Al-Hakawati Palestinian National Theatre.

The disruptive dramatisation of the ghost has a theatrical significance, and it targets the audience's conscience and memory. Its scary shape discomforts the audience and compels them to remember the time when they were unified under Arafat's governance and who unified Palestinians against occupation and always avoided any clashes with other parties. It is also important to mention that Arafat's quick illness and mysterious death in his centre in Ramallah in 2004 were highly shocking for the Palestinians. Many

suspicions have been raised about Arafat's unnatural death and the quick burying of his body, and many assumed the assassination of Arafat by poison. The accusations were directed at the Israeli government and at some of the Palestinian fellows surrounding him (Saleh et al. 2014, pp. 13–16). However, the Palestinians demanded an immediate international investigation to discover the identity of the real murderer, but there was intentional procrastination to the investigation. It was not until 2012 that some Swiss experts from the Swiss University of Lausanne confirmed in a conference that Arafat's corpse contains enough amount of plutonium enough to kill a person, but this very late dissection of the corpse would not prove the crime or decide who the real murderer is (Clarke 2018, p. 28).

The similarities between the death of King Hamlet and Arafat by poison are incited by EL-Basha to present the spirit in an innovative way. The first time that Hamlet's chorus encounters the ghost is when it reveals the secret of the murder to them. The spirit clarifies that it is Old Hamlet's ghost who has ascended from purgatory to tell his son about the murder Claudius committed (See Figure 5).

<p>The CHORUS (<i>stand still</i>): Speak, I'll go no any step further.</p> <p>GHOST: Mark me! My hour almost comes when I to sulphurous and tormenting flames must render up myself.</p> <p>The CHORUS: Why are you telling me that poor ghost?</p> <p>GHOST: Pity me not, but lend thy serious hearing to what I shall unfold.</p> <p>The CHORUS: Speak! I am listening.</p> <p>GHOST: You must be ready for revenge, too, when you hear me out.</p> <p>The CHORUS: What?</p> <p>GHOST: I am thy father's spirit, Doomed for a certain term to walk the night and for the day confined to fast in fires till the foul crimes done in my days of nature are burnt and purged away. But that I am forbid to tell the secrets of my prison house, I could a tale unfold whose lightest word would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood.</p> <p>The CHORUS: Oh God!</p> <p>The CHORUS (<i>in one voice</i>): Ah, all you up in heaven! And earth! My Father is in Hell. My heart, and muscles, don't grow old yet, keep me standing. You poor ghost, as long as I have any power of memory in this distracted head. Remember you! Yes, I'll wipe my mind clean of all trivial facts and memories and preserve only your commandment there. (Looks at his mother) O fatal and destructive woman. (Turn to his uncle) you dreaded rascal bastard. For my secret word: Good Bye! "Remember me." I have sworn.</p>	<p>الـجـوـفـة (يقفون متجمدين): تكلم! لن أتقدم خطوة.</p> <p>الـشـيـخ: انظر! إلي! كنت ساعتي التي علي فيها أن أذرت نفسي بنيران الكبريت والعذاب.</p> <p>الـجـوـفـة: وأنا مالي ومالك أيها الشيخ المسكين؟</p> <p>الـشـيـخ: لا تخلف علي وأخبرني إذنا جالدة مصيبة لها مؤف ابوح به.</p> <p>الـجـوـفـة: تكلم ها أنا أسمع!</p> <p>الـشـيـخ: ومثلزم أنت أيضا بالانتقام.</p> <p>الـجـوـفـة: ماذا؟</p> <p>الـشـيـخ: أنا روح أبيك، وقد حكم علي أن أطوف بالليل زهدا وفي النهار أن أتمور جوعا في اللهب إلى أن يخرق هذا القتر من الأكام في حياتي الدنيا. ولما لم يخطر علي أن أفشي أئزار سجنى لسرت علي شفك قصة تحدث نفسك وتجد نفسك الغبي.</p> <p>الـجـوـفـة: زياد</p> <p>الـجـوـفـة (يتجمعون ومضت واحد): يا جحافل السماء! أيها الأرض! لا تبات! وإلبي في الجحيم! ثباتك أيها القلب! وانتي يا افكارى لا تضيحي. أجل! أيها الشيخ المسكين! ها دام للذكرى مكان في هذه الكرة المشوشة لن أنساه. أجل! من لوح ذاكرتي سامحي كل تلويح سويقت الخلق من كل كشي ظها. كل شيء وكل شيء! فعنى بما نبيح الحجاب هناك وسجلته الملاحظة ولن يبتقى في كتابي ذنبي! إلا أتركه وخذلك كوني غفرك.</p> <p>(يلفت إلى امه) أيها المرأة الفتاة المنمردة. (يظهر إلى صه) أية الدال البشام اللعين. . . اما كلمة السر جندي فهي: وداعا! وداعا! لا تنسني. لقد أقسمت.</p>
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Figure 5. The scene in which the Hamlet chorus first encounter the ghost in Act I Scene 5. The text is transcribed from a video of the production posted on YouTube (See El-Basha 2013).

Most of Hamlet's dialogue is spoken collectively, and some lines are spoken individually by individual members. The Arabic translated dialogue is very consistent with Shakespeare's text with few modifications, for example when the ghost repeats "Remember me!" three times in the production. The groups respond that they will never forget the ghost's commands. In Gertrude's room, the chorus thought that the ghost came to chide his commands again when they say: "Have you come to scold your tardy son for straying from his mission, letting your important command slip by? Tell me!" (El-Basha 2013, 46:00). But the ghost tells the chorus to be kinder to Gertrude, who is convinced that her son suffers madness after his father's death. The chorus asks Gertrude to look carefully and see the ghost, "Look, look how it's sneaking away", but she replies that she cannot see anything: "No, nothing but ourselves" (El-Basha 2013, 46:24).

It is perhaps true that El-Basha's dramatisation of the ghost perplexes the audience at the beginning and distracts them from following the actions. Still, the important thing is that it quickly achieves its goal by evoking their anxiety and making them eager to look at the past and connect the ghost to Palestinian national figures like Arafat. The ghost, in a different manner, asks the chorus to remember it three times. It is not only searching for revenge, but it also demands remembrance. This remembrance shapes the presence of the ghost haunting the stages all the time. Emily Pine traced how the appearance of the ghosts on Irish stages, for example, usually connects Irish people with their past time and national figures. According to Pine:

Ghosts are unwanted haunting presences, yet they also testify to a fascination—even obsession—with the past. Ghosts thus embody the tension between forgetting and remembering that runs through Irish remembrance culture. (Pine 2011, p. 154)

In *Hamlet and Purgatory* (2013), Stephen Greenblatt also emphasises that the ghost "not only cries out for vengeance but his parting injunction, the solemn command upon which young Hamlet dwells obsessively, is that he remembers" (p. 206). Greenblatt (1992) believes that the ghost's appearance is accompanied by horror and intensity of feeling to make its memory dig deep in Hamlet's mind and make him willing "to wipe away [all] saws of books, all forms, all pressures past" from his mind (*Hamlet*, Act I, Scene v, Line 99–100). It is important for the ghost to be disruptive for his son's mind to make him always remember his uncle's sin. Similarly, El-Basha's huge and fearful ghost becomes very disruptive for the audiences to compel them to remember the old days when they were unified under Arafat's rule.

EL-Basha's performance is commensurate with the fundamental function of the theatre as a memory machine. According to Peter Holland, "If the theatre were a verb, it would be to remember" (Holland 2006, p. 207). Also, "Theatre is . . . a function of remembrance. Where memory is, theatre is" (Cited in Carlson 2001, p. vii). Its powerful effect ensued when it "plays on the nostalgic, on a version of memory, idealising the past as a way of looking at the present" (Kershaw and Nicholson 2013, p. 24). For this sake of remembrance, playwrights like EL-Basha, always implement images, stories, characters, verbatim, and ghosts relating to historical figures and past incidents that evoke the collective memory of a particular nation.⁸ Moreover, if the chorus sees the play-within-the-play as a way to capture Claudius's conscience and makes him confess his crime, El-Basha's complete performance is targeting the spectators' memory and making them think carefully about the danger of maintaining internal political rifts that kept them busy from fighting the occupation. If Claudius is responsible for running Denmark to whom the Mousetrap should be addressed, then El-Basha's play is addressed to some of the Palestinians who participated in running Palestine when many of them supported the conflict between Fatah and Hamas and tolerated the division for fifteen years. This is the significance of the ghost with its enormous size and unusual presence on the stage. It intends to disrupt them, make them uncomfortable, and compel them to remember their unity.

After the collective death of Hamlet's chorus due to the poison, preceded also by the death of the Ophelias after committing suicide, and which the audience can see on the stage

this time, all the spirits of the characters including Gertrude follow the ghost outside the stage walking slowly and singing. Claudius is left alone regretting his destructive policies before he dies. In a direct speech to the audience, he confesses his remorse (See Figure 6)

<p>What stinky my sin is, Its stink reaches to Heaven, And upon it, the first and oldest curse was put: A brother kills his brother</p>	<p>مَا أَفْنَنْتَنِي ، بَلَّغَتْ رِيحُهُ حُدُ السَّمَاءِ ، وَظَلَمَهُ حُطَّتْ أَزْلَى اللَّحَدَاتِ وَأَهْمَهَا : قَتَلَ أَخَ لِأَخِيهِ .</p>
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Figure 6. Claudius’s last words in the play. The text is transcribed from a video of the production posted on YouTube (See [El-Basha 2013](#)).

El-Basha ends his play tragically with the collective death of the characters to deliver a message to the audience. He wants to fuel their fear of the catastrophic future Palestinians will face if they sustain the division nourished by the Fatah/Hamas political struggle to rule Palestine.

4. Conclusions

El-Basha’s *Following the Footsteps of Hamlet* is a real manifestation of the desired unification in post-2006 divided Palestine. The performance materialises unity and the audience can feel the connection in the space for one hour and a half through the chorus’s identical dress, collective speeches, and similar movements. It is a real festival in which both actors and the audience celebrate their cultures, identity, and resistance. The collective songs, the dabke, and the performing of other rituals help create a harmonious atmosphere among them. The ghost is also employed skillfully to target the audience’s memory and compel them to remember their unified resistance to the occupation empowered by the internal Palestinian conflict that lasted between Hamas and Fatah for fifteen years. The performance asks the audience important questions like how long can they endure division? Who are the most to benefit from that conflict? And what are the hard consequences that might result from that separation?

It is not only that El-Basha’s *Hamlet* has unique dramatisation in employing the chorus, which is a new theatrical experience in the Arab World that needs more critical attention, but what is more important is the political message the audience can grasp at the end. El-Basha creates an atmosphere in which the audience experience unity and obliges them to remember and think of the time they were unified in resisting the occupation and their struggle for liberation.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank my wife Amneh Abu Mqaibil for her support. Many thanks also to my colleagues in the Department of Comparative Literature, University of Szeged, Hungary.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- Occasional perfunctory meetings have been held between the two parties under the auspices of Arab countries like Mecca Agreement in the Saudi Kingdom in 2007, Cairo Agreement in 2011, The Beach Meeting in Palestine in 2014, Doha Declaration in 2014, and Cairo Agreement in 2017. Unfortunately, these meetings have been of no use.
- It is also important to mention that the reworking of *Hamlet* by El-Basha is not an extraordinary endeavour within Arab theatre history. Many Arab playwrights and stage directors have rewritten and adapted the play for political purposes since the 1960s. The play has been reproduced in more than twelve Arabic adaptations in the period between 1960–2020. See Margrat Litvin’s *Hamlet’s Arab Journey* ([Litvin 2011](#)) and Ziad Abushalha’s “Not a Stranger Anymore: Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and the Politics of the Arab World after 1950” ([Abushalha 2021](#)).

- 3 Dabke is a traditional dance acted mainly by Palestinian males in a straight line. It is performed in happy occasions by the males holding one another's hands and hitting the floor with counted and systematic steps. They are usually accompanied by traditional music played with Mijwiz, a musical instrument popular in Palestine, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon.
- 4 Here I rely on the following text for the English translation: Shakespeare (2002). *Hamlet*. Edited by George Hibbard, Oxford University Press.
- 5 The song is 'Hanneni Yama Hanneni Wdaweely Sham'a Daweely' (Translated as 'Oh Mother Cover my hands with Hina and Light the Candle').
- 6 A Kufiya is the traditional Palestinian scarf worn generally by males on their heads or around the neck. It became an icon of liberation and a defining dress for the Palestinians' struggle under occupation.
- 7 *Muwashshah* (in Arabic موشح) is an Arabic popular poetic form originating from the Arabic Andalusian literature and is always sung in standard Arabic. One of the famous poems sang by the characters in the play is *Salab Anoum Kayalun Maranee* (A passing shadow deprived my eyes from sleep). For more on the form, see Menocal et al. (2006) *The Literature of Al-Andalus*, p. 166.
- 8 Marvin Carlson accentuates this ghostliness in his book *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (2001) by explaining how every play might be called a 'ghost' since "every play is a memory play" (p. 8) He calls this mechanism of remembrance 'ghostliness' which he characterizes as "the revisiting of past incidents and figures in recent memory of a particular nation to understand and interpret new and somewhat different phenomena" and the "retelling again and again of stories that bear particular religious, social, or political significance for the public" (2001, p. 8).

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